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AUTHOR	Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Four major types of approaches to learner assessment are standardized testing, materials-based, competency-based, and participatory assessment. Standardized tests are easy and inexpensive to administer. Objections are their intrinsic defects and misuse. Materials-based assessment, the practice of evaluating learners on the basis of tests following the completion of particular curriculum materials, creates a closed system. Because competency-based assessment recognizes the importance of prior learning and rewards what individuals can already do, it is more compatible for use with adults. A criticism is that it is still a test given under classroom conditions. Participatory assessment has these features: a view of literacy as practices and critical reflection, the use of a broad range of assessment strategies, and an active role for learners in the assessment process. A criticism is that alternate forms of assessment lead to less demanding levels of achievement. Guidelines for selecting assessment instruments and procedures include: purpose of the assessment; appropriateness of the instrument; reliability, validity, and practicality of the instrument; and congruence between instrument/approach and instruction. (Five references are listed.) (YLB)

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ADULT LITERACY LEARNER ASSESSMENT

Learner assessment, the process of collecting and analyzing data provided by learners in order to make judgments about the literacy accomplishments of individuals or groups, is a key feature of adult literacy programs. Learner assessment occurs in different forms throughout an adult's participation in a literacy program. It frequently reflects different views of literacy and learning and yields distinct types of information to different stakeholders. It provides information to teachers for use in instructional planning, to learners for determining their progress toward particular goals, to program managers and staff for evaluating the impact of instruction, and to funders for establishing some degree of program accountability and success (Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

Four major types of approaches to learner assessment have been identified in the literature: standardized testing, materials based, competency based, and participatory. This ERIC Digest provides an overview of these four assessment approaches, including some issues affiliated with each. It ends with some suggested guidelines for selecting assessment procedures.

Approaches to Learner Assessment

Each of the four approaches to learner assessment described here reflects varying philosophical orientations and perspectives related to learners, literacy, and educational contexts.

Standardized Testing

Because standardized tests are relatively easy and inexpensive to administer, standardized testing is the most widely used approach in adult literacy assessment in the United States. Large groups of adults can take a test under the supervision of a comparatively small number of administrators. In addition, the training requirements to administer the test are minimal (ibid.).

By definition, a standardized test is designed to be given under specified, standard conditions. If it is not, the results are invalid (Business Council for Effective Literacy 1990; Sticht 1990). Standardized tests may be either norm- or criterion-referenced. Many of the standardized tests of reading used in adult literacy programs are norm-referenced, that is, they measure an individual's performance against a "normal" performance established by others who have taken the test (BCEL 1990; Lytle and Wolfe 1989). Criterion-referenced tests, on the other hand, assess a learner's achievement against an absolute standard or criterion of performance rather than against a norming group (Sticht 1990).

Despite their extensive use in adult literacy assessment, standardized tests have a number of critics among researchers and practitioners. According to the BCEL (1990), the "objections [to standardized tests] tend to fall into two broad categories: their intrinsic defects and their misuse" (p. 6). The major intrinsic defect is the fact that they rely on grade-level equivalents, i.e., they have been normed on children. Such measures do not reveal the extent of the life experiences and knowledge that adults bring to an instructional program nor do they provide data that can be used in developing an appropriate instructional program. Other difficulties in the use of standardized tests involve the relationship of the tests to a program's instructional model and the fact that many adults associate them with previous school failure (BCEL 1990; Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

The misuse of standardized tests relates to the practice of employing them as the sole component of program evaluation. Although learner assessment is an important component of program evaluation, a number of other elements such as program management, teaching, and curriculum need to be examined in judging program effectiveness (BCEL 1990).

Improvements that address some of their intrinsic defects are being made in standardized tests. The Degrees of Reading Power test uses cloze passages and therefore reflects more current views of the reading process as the construction of reading. Item response theory, a psychometric theory that takes into account certain factors such as item difficulty, is also being applied in some standardized tests (Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

Materials-based Assessment

Materials-based assessment refers to the practice of evaluating learners on the basis of tests following the completion of a particular set of curriculum materials. It shares some features with standardized tests such as availability through commercial publishers, ease of administration, and a view of literacy as reading skills.

Although the materials-based approach to assessment makes possible a close connection between curriculum and assessment, it creates a closed system that does not invite analysis of teaching processes and materials. Because most of the curriculum is prepackaged, there is little opportunity for learners to direct their own study. Also, the literacy activities beyond the system go unassessed and may not be recognized as meaningful by learners and teachers (Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

Competency-based Assessment

Closely related to criterion-referenced standardized testing, competency-based adult literacy assessment measures an individual's performance against a predetermined standard of acceptable performance. Progress is based on actual performance rather than on how well learners perform in comparison to others (Lytle and Wolfe 1989; Sticht 1990).

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Competency-based education and assessment were developed in response to the need to assess adult literacy achievement within a functional framework. Because it recognizes the importance of prior learning and rewards what individuals can already do, it is more compatible for use with adults than standardized testing or the materials-based approach. Assessment is also frequent, providing learners with regular feedback and allowing them to advance when ready (Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

Despite its compatibility with adult education philosophy and practice, competency-based assessment also has its critics. Because competency-based assessment usually takes place within the educational setting, it is still a test given under classroom conditions; thus a key theoretical concept of successful functioning in life roles is removed from the assessment process. Some critics also contend that, like the materials-based approach, competency-based assessment systems control and restrict teaching and learning (ibid.).

Participatory Assessment

Participatory assessment is a process that views assessment as much more than testing. Features of participatory assessment include a view of literacy as practices and critical reflection, the use of a broad range of strategies in assessment, and an active role for learners in the assessment process (BCEL 1990; Lytle and Wolfe 1989). Those advocating a participatory approach do so because of a belief that "learners, their characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs should be at the center of literacy instruction" (Fingeret and Jurmo 1989, p. 5).

The following assumptions support the participatory assessment process: "the paramount purpose of assessment should be to help the learner achieve his or her goals; what is assessed must reflect what the learner wishes or needs to accomplish; the process must build on the learner's experience and strengths rather than deficits; assessment is not something done to the learner; [and] it should not be externally imposed nor shrouded in mystery, nor separated from what goes on in the regular course of learning activity" (BCEL 1990, p. 7).

Sometimes known as "alternative assessment approaches or methods" (BCEL 1990; Sticht 1990), elements of participatory assessment have been adopted by a number of adult literacy educators. The Adult Literacy Evaluation Project (ALEP) in Philadelphia is a project that includes many features of participatory assessment. This collaborative research project has developed alternatives to standardized tests and grade-level equivalences in measuring progress in literacy. The California Adult Learner Progress Evaluation Process, a joint program of the California State Libraries/California Literacy Campaign and the Educational Testing Service, also employs some participatory approaches to assessment. It uses forms developed for joint use by tutors and learners but that are written with the learner as the primary audience (Lytle and Wolfe 1989).

Despite its congruency with many of the assumptions underlying good adult education practice, participatory assessment is not without its critics. One question has to do with whether the use of alternate forms of assessment--rather than standardized tests--leads to less demanding levels of achievement. Also, sole reliance on nonstandardized methods makes it difficult to make comparisons with other programs for the purpose of program evaluation (Sticht 1990).

Conclusion

Given the plethora of approaches and instruments available for assessing adult literacy learners, what should guide the decisions about which to use? Nurss (1989) suggests the following questions be considered in selecting assessment instruments and procedures for use in adult literacy: What is the purpose of the assessment?, Is the assessment instrument appropriate for use with adults?, How reliable, practical, and valid is the instrument?, Is the instrument culturally sensitive?, and Is there congruence between the instrument/approach and the instruction.

According to Lytle and Wolfe (1989) "of prime importance seems to be the degree of congruence between particular approaches and a program's curricula and teaching practices" (p. 57). However, some interpret "the degree of congruence" to mean that both instruction and assessment should be standardized. Also, some question whether any single measure is capable of capturing the repertoire of skills and strategies an individual needs to accomplish a variety of literacy tasks.

Because of the variety of learner goals and accomplishments, multiple methods of assessment seem logical. Such an approach provides learners, teachers, and other stakeholders with multiple views of learner accomplishments.

References

This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

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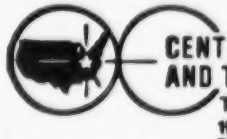

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 KENNY ROAD • COLUMBUS, OHIO 43210
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